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ABSTRACT

There is a wealth of material in the oral tradition of fantasy which can be used in creating gripping fiction for young readers. One way of employing a tale from the oral tradition to produce a modern fantasy is to superimpose the old story on a new one in such a way that it is tightly interwoven in the action and meaning of the new story. This technique may be seen in three recent novels. "The Owl Service" by Alan Garner, "The Seal-Singing" by Rosemary Harris, and "A Game of Dark" by William Mayne. These books exhibit three different ways of combining the old and the new story so that each novel provides a double perspective and is a fantasy of unusual fascination and depth. (JM)

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DOUBLE PERSPECTIVES: OLD TALES IN MODERN NOVELS

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All good fantasy can be viewed from more than one perspective. Since fantasy knows no age limits, a difference in the viewpoint is made just by the change that occurs as we, the readers, grow older or more mature. There is also a new perspective created within many fantasies, a view of the world of reality through the eyes of a character in some way different from the ordinary human. Sometimes this is a perspective caused by a size difference, a Gulliver or a Borrower seeing ordinary things from an unusual dimension, or by a time change within the story, as in Philippa Pearce's haunting Tom's Midnight Garden. Or it might be that the reader is looking through the eyes of an animal, a water rat or a pig named Wilbur; or through the character of some other sort of non-human, a stuffed bear with very little brain or one of the sturdy wooden soldiers in Pauline Clarke's Return of the Twelves.

There is also the sort of fantasy which employs a specific story or type of story from myth or hero tale or even folk tale, in which a different perspective is created by a pattern or setting, familiar from the oral tradition, now peopled by new characters or retold in a new way. Many recent examples of this use of old tales in new ways come to mind: the vivid retellings by Leon Garfield and Edward Blishen, which give a dramatic quality almost like that of a novel to Greek myth and hero tale; the old story with a new twist, as in the clever version of Noah's tale in The Moon in the Cloud by Rosemary Harris; the old pattern with new characters, like Tolkien's quest stories in both The Hobbit and The Lord of the Rings.

A recent study of fantasy for children has dismissed the sort which has its origin in myth and folk tales as worn out. "Perhaps it is presumptuous to say anything against a form which has survived so long," the writer says, "and which has so many distinguished exemplars, but in my opinion it is difficult in the age of television to say anything fresh in this format. Ten thousand TV cartoons have cranked the life out of it, often cleverly."[1] This seems to me a surprising assessment. It is true, of course, that the wise-cracking modernized folktale has reworked again and again to a wearying stereotype. It is also true that it is difficult to say anything fresh in this format. It is difficult to say anything fresh in any format. But just as we begin to think a form is used up, a book will appear that breathes new life into it and gives us renewed insights

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into its possibilities. Certainly even since the coming of television we have had some marvelous examples of fantasy employing stories from the oral tradition: Tolkien's later works, all the books by Alan Garner and Rosemary Harris and Mollie Hunter and Ursula LeGuin, and the best of William Mayne--the list could go on and on. Yet such is the wealth of material from the oral tradition that it has hardly been touched as source material for fantasy for children.

One particular way of employing an old story to produce a modern fantasy deserves to be examined more closely. The old story is superimposed on a new one, so that the power of the tale from the oral tradition operates in the modern story, tightly enmeshed in the action and meaning. This technique is exhibited in three recent novels for young people, The Owl Service, by Alan Garner, The Seal-Singing, by Rosemary Harris, and A Game of Dark, by William Mayne. All these books happen to be by English writers, a fact which may be significant since the English have long produced superior fantasy and have always been more at home with myth and hero tale than we have in this country. All three books seem to me important not only because they are gripping stories told by experts, but also because they exhibit three quite different ways this combination of old and new story can be written to produce a double perspective and a fantasy of more than ordinary fascination and depth.

In structure, the simplest of these three books is Mayne's A Game of Dark. Donald, a fifteen-year-old in a drab provincial English town, really inhabits two worlds. One is his own, in which his invalid father, now dying, and his preoccupied mother urge on him a Methodism, meaningless to him, which dominates their lives, and Mr. Braxham, "Berry", a hip Anglican priest, seems to offer an alternative that never quite comes to grips with Donald's problems. The other is the medieval world of some impoverished village tormented by a monster worm, a creature which has come out of the sea and settled nearby, nightly visiting the town, to seize and devour villagers, leaving a hideous trail of stinking and caustic slime. These two worlds alternate, sometimes for a paragraph, sometimes for pages at a time. The skill with which Mayne slips back and forth is admirable. A reader is never confused about where he is, never uncomfortably aware of the shift from one setting to the other, and, a greater achievement, remains continually interested in what is going on in both worlds.

Although this alternation from one world to another is simple in structure, it is not the familiar pattern of fantasy in which a character from the present, usually aided by some magic device, moves to another time or place, has adventures, then returns to his real existence. Donald's two worlds have both

parallels and contrasts, and what happens in one has some effect on what happens in the other. In each he must overcome a "monster", something he cannot hope to do until he has matured in understanding. At home it is not so much his father who is his opposition as his father's illness and Donald's own guilt for not feeling sympathy and love:

> What he noticed most about the pain Mr. Jackson had to bear was his own inability to appreciate and understand it. It meant to him a white-faced man of uncertain temper and dour disposition, and the necessity of keeping quieter than usual...[2]

This is complicated by the fact that his father's suffering is unnecessary; he could get relief if he would allow the doctor to give him injections, but he refuses on the religious grounds that one should bear one's pain willingly. In the medieval village, Donald, there known as "Jackson", is at first simply a boy from the north who has wandered into the area; then he is commandeered to be a servant to the lord of the castle, later promoted to squire, and at last made a field-knight. There the problem is the worm, which he and the lord have managed to control temporarily by leaving a cow each night for it to eat. It is a formidable opponent:

> It came on, screwing its way toward the cow. It was about ninety feet long, of a white colour, limbless, and had two protuberances, one either side, about half way along itself. The head was a searcher on a thick neck. The mouth opened and closed in time to its movements forwards. Its eyes were not plain to see, but it had been proved to possess sight, and a sense of smell and it could hear. More than that, it could sense people who were out of sight, not moving and downwind of it, so that it had an extra sense of detection.
>
> It approached the cow. The cow bellowed and tried to run, but the rope held it. The worm opened a mouth with a ten foot jaw, cast out a clasp of vapour that sparkled in the moonlight, and took the cow in. Then it stood still. The cloud of vapour hung in the air, then fell in a white drift to the ground. The worm lifted its head, made a movement of its neck, and spat something out.
>
> "Skin and horns," said the lord. "Bleached white."[3]

The parallels in the two concurrent stories are not one-for-one in any allegorical sense. Donald and Jackson are, of course, the same person, although during the book much more time elapses for Jackson. The characters of Berry and the lord form the closest parallel; both seem to offer some hope and protection to the boy, both confess to an earlier mistake which should have given them understanding and insight, yet both nevertheless fail him at the crucial time. In both worlds there is a conflict between doing things in the accepted pattern, which does not work, or doing things in an unorthodox way, in which even when

one is successful he will be considered a failure. Even the hero tale of the medieval village is not resolved in the usual pattern. The knight hired to slay the serpent runs away; the lord, who follows all the correct forms, is defeated hideously; Jackson, whose bravery finally overcomes the monster, is driven from the town because he has not acted according to the code. But it is one's knowledge of the usual medieval hero tale pattern that gives meaning to Jackson's story and, indirectly, to Donald's story.

There are some unresolved questions in the book. How much hint of homosexuality is intended in Berry's character? He first appears at the Youth Guild with "his left arm around the shoulders of Jack Copsey, and his right arm round the shoulders of Lanky Errington"[4] and is continually touching, hugging, patting the boys; he seems to be nice to the girls as a matter of duty and says frankly that he likes Donald better than he liked Donald's sister, whom, nevertheless, he had managed to convert; his own two children, we are told for no other apparent reason, are adopted. How much of Mr. Jackson's invalidism is psychosomatic? Donald's mother says. "There never was much wrong physically....We knew it was a visitation from God."[5] How much is his death caused by his refusal to take the injections? At the end, he has an inflamation of the lungs, which, presumably, antibiotics might have cured. These questions do not, I think, indicate a weakness in Mayne's writing. It is important that everything not be tied up in a neat package, since part of Donald's final awareness is that things do not operate by the prescribed rules and in the looked-for patterns. Mayne's skill is in using the form of the traditional hero tale to give meaning to the story of a maturing twentieth-century boy.

Jackson's story can be explained, of course, as simply a self-induced fantasy into which Donald retreats when the real world is too miserable to bear. He himself partially understands this, seeing himself as both Donald and Jackson at once, and having a choice between the two selves:

> He was being some other person, he found, in a crisp buzzing world of hard light and hard ground and hard people. Then, for a moment again he was Donald walking towards the bridge, and the boy who that morning, perhaps, had called himself Jackson to a girl on a hillside. For a moment he could choose again which he would be. One is real, he said to himself. Donald is real. The other is a game of darkness, and I can be either and step from one to the other as I like. So he chose to stay on the sleeping shelf, without knowing how completely he became the person there.[6]

The events of the other two books are not so easy to explain. The Seal-Singing has an almost gothic setting, an old castle on an island off the Scottish

coast, and employs a pair of local legends about the seals which breed on the island. Much Scottish folklore is concerned with the human qualities of seals, seal parentage, the Silkie or seal-lover, but it is not specifically with this sort of story that Rosemary Harris is concerned. In her book there are really three stories operating. The present day story is about four teen-agers summering on Carrigonia island, three of whom are cousins of sort sort and the fourth a hired hand. Catriona and Toby are first cousins, old friends, joint owners (or at least heirs to) the castle, and, we find out soon, surprisingly innocent lovers. They are joined by a more distant cousin, Miranda, a spoiled, lonely girl of sixteen, just between Toby and Cat in age, who is being dumped on them by her divorced parents during her school holidays. Colin, the boy who works on the island, is both an employee and a friend, described somewhat improbably as a tough Irish slum boy from Glasgow. Toby is spending his summer looking for and then raising a baby seal, a project which involves all of them and becomes intertwined with the two legends of seals which also operate in the book. The first is the legend of St. Culzean who "blew in from Ireland, one day, in that casual way the early Christians had."[7] The seals, who bred on the island, at first tried to prevent his landing by wrecking his coracle. As Toby explains to Miranda,

> "He preached to them. Like St. Francis, only with more difficulties, when you think of the waves. At first they wouldn't listen, and rocked the boat harder. But St. Culzean lifted his eyes heavenward and prayed for a sign, to convert these wayward little brothers who were making things too difficult for him to land and convert the heathen. All at once the water round the coracle was full of salmon, leaping and dancing. The seals leaped and danced too, to catch the salmon. When they'd eaten there was a great calm, and swimming under the coracle they bore it lovingly toward the shore."[8]

The second legend is about a direct ancestress of all three cousins, Lucy, a girl reputed in her time to be a witch, whose portrait hangs in the hallway of the castle, where she grew up in the sixteenth century. She started her unhappy life as a very religious girl, specially in tune with the chapel and the memory of St. Culzean, and with the unusual ability to "call the seals", summoning them by the special Seal-Singing, whose words and melody Cat and Toby teach to Miranda. She was married young and unhappily, and, virtually a prisoner on Carrigonia, began to dabble in witchcraft, as her grandfather was reputed to have done, and eventually found a lover, a young man who, like St. Culzean centuries before, "did blow in--from Ireland".[9] When her husband was about to return and find her pregnant, she did a terrible thing. In order to finance her escape with her lover, she called the trusting seals in and let her ruthless lover massacre the

young ones for their pelts. She and her lover started away, but the boat was wrecked just off shore. And the remaining seals left the island. Her vindictive husband had her buried outside the chapel ground without prayers, and the day after she was buried the seals returned.

In the present-day story, Lucy's tale is reenacted, with variations. Miranda, who is musically adept, learns the Seal-Singing from her two cousins one stormy night, and while she is singing it, her hands on the guitar seem to both her and Cat to change, to become someone else's hands wearing the ring which Lucy's grandfather, the warlock, wears in his portrait. Miranda feels the lamplight fade.

> ....the guitar blurred too: smaller and darker, and a different shape. And the hands were white, with the heavy enameled ring on the long, elegant, middle finger. Smooth and white, and the fingers plucked so-- These hands, plucking so knowledgeably, are not mine--[10]

This is the first of a series of strange happenings in the book, hallucinations perhaps, hysteria, mass hypnosis--the options are left open for the reader. The events are so inseparable from the atmosphere of the island--the sudden gales, the howling winds, the crumbling ruins of the chapel--that one is never sure how much is real and how much is in the imaginations of the characters.

But there are some very real practical problems. The day after Miranda learns the Seal-Singing, the seals are found to have left Carrigonia. This is serious because while Carrigonia is a game refuge, on the nearby islands hunters are allowed to slaughter a quota of young seals for their pelts, and this season they have not found enough seals to fill their quota. Shortly after this occurrence Miranda finds an injured baby seal and Toby adopts it, turning the efforts of everyone on the island, including the cook and caretaker couple who are ostensibly looking after the young people, to its cure and feeding. Partly because she is spoiled and bored, and partly because she feels excluded by her cousins, Miranda makes friends with a boy from the mainland and inadvertently reveals the secret that the seals have left Carrigonia for a nearby island. From then on she seems forced to act the part of Lucy or, more precisely, to make reparations in her role as Lucy for the damage to the seals done so long ago in the earlier tale.

It would be easy enough to dismiss this book as a thriller well written but like many others full of witches, flickering lights, wailing winds--all the paraphernalia of One Step Beyond or Inner Sanctum. The use of the legend, however, taken seriously by the characters and by the writer, lifts the story into another category. It is through the parallels to the legend that one understands Miranda's conflicts and strength, and Catriona's, too, since she is entangled in it in her

own way. Tony is almost romantically involved with his seal and Colin is a realist. The girls are more mature. Perhaps for this reason, or perhaps because in folklore female humans are traditionally more involved with seals, the girls see most of the visions, if indeed what they see is not as real as Colin's turf-cutting.

In The Owl Service there is no question of whether the fantasy is real or brought on by some sort of self-hypnosis among the characters. From the first few pages we know something is happening beyond the ordinary events of our world, something threatening and powerful, over which the characters will not have full control. Of the three books, this has the most complex structure and is perhaps the most interesting in its use of old story. In it a Welsh myth is reenacted in the present generation, but the reader also gradually becomes aware that it is reenacted in each generation, and it is the sorting out of who plays the various parts now and in the preceding generation that gives much of the fascination to the book.

The Celtic legend forming the background for The Owl Service is the story of Blodeuwedd from the Mabinogion. Blodeuwedd is the wife made from flowers for Llew Llaw Gyffes by Gwydion, his father, who is a wizard. Blodeuwedd takes a lover, Gronw, and persuades him to kill her husband. Llew Llaw Gyffes, however, does not die but is turned into an eagle, and Gwydion finds him and restores him to his former shape. Gwydion and Llew Llaw Gyffes then kill Gronw and change Blodeuwedd into an owl.

The present-day story takes place in a Welsh valley, presumably the very valley in which the story of Blodeuwedd first occurred. Allison, who is heir to a house through her father's family, is spending the summer there with her mother, her recently acquired step-father, Clive, and step-brother, Roger. Their cook is Nancy, a woman who grew up in the valley but left and has only recently returned with her son, Gwyn. The three who form the triangle in the present-day reenactment are Allison, Gwyn and Roger. The only other important character is Huw, a local worker who appears to the English (Roger and Clive and Allison's mother) to be a sort of rustic handiman, but who is considered by the people of the valley as a noble, a lord. With Bertram, now dead, Huw and Nancy formed the triangle in the immediately preceding generation, as we learn through the unfolding of the present day story.

Only Huw really knows what is happening. By tampering with nature in giving the flowers a human mind and then denying the human quality by turning Blodeuwedd into an owl, Gwdion upset some fine balance and unleashed a power that builds up inexorably until it finds a human mind to inhabit again. At the time of the story,

the power is building up to an unbearable force. The people of the valley do not understand it, but they feel it coming. Huw knows, but even Huw seems to have mixed the story up. "We have the blood," he tells Gwyn.

> "We have the blood....And we must bear it. A lord must look to his people, and they must not suffer for his wrong. When I took the powers of the oak and the broom and the meadow-sweet, and made them woman, that was a great wrong--to give those powers a thinking mind."[11]

Gwyn tells him he's muddled and Huw replies, with fear, "What do I know?...What do I know....I know more than I know...I don't know what I know...The weight, the weight of it!"[12]

Gwyn instinctively feels the power, and being an intelligent boy has figures it out better than anyone else. He tells Allison:

> "I think this valley really is a kind of reservoir. The house, look, smack in the middle, with the mountains all round, shutting it in, guarding the house. I think the power is always there and always will be. It builds up and builds up until it has to be let loose--like filling and emptying a dam. And it works through people."[13]

The power gathers to the exploding point within the three young people, but it does not destroy them as it nearly destroyed the three in the generation before them, and so the valley is saved, at lease for another generation. Belief in this power, therefore belief in the essential truth of the legend, is important to an appreciation of the book. Garner captures the reader's belief early and never for a paragraph relaxes his hold on it.

All three of these books move with a pace and tension typical of some of the best writing for young people in recent years. A reader jumps into the middle of a story and is not favored with any leisurely explanation of who is who or what is happening. In this, the writers use a technique close to that of the old stories, of ballads and story-telling, but converted into a tight, written narrative style. It is an exciting tempo, used, I think, most often by the English, by Mayne in Ravensgill and by Peter Dickinson in his science fiction, by Leon Garfield in his 18th century period novels. It is also demanding. The books have none of the condescension that characterized much "teen-age fiction" not long ago. Certainly some of the best authors currently writing are producing all types of fiction for this audience, and among the novels are some first rate English fantasies. To me, these fantasies are far more interesting than much of American fiction for the same age group concerned with topical social and psychological problems.

None of these three books is perfect. All, I think, have some weakness in characterization. Berry, the Anglican minister in A Game of Dark, is drawn as too

facile and imaginative. We have to know that he is the sort of person who gets buddy-buddy with the youngsters at the Youth Guild but will fail Donald when the boy really needs understanding, yet he is so unsympathetically pictured that it is hard to see why Donald would turn to him as a father-figure. In The Seal-Singing, the girls are convincing, and even Toby, though he seems rather immature for his seventeen years, is acceptable. But I cannot believe that Colin is a street-wise boy from a slum in Glasgow--or any other city. He is useful in the structure of character relationships as the steady, practical one of the quartet whose acceptance of the strange phenomena casts doubt on the mass-hallucination explanation, but he remains a character set there by the author and manipulated to serve a purpose. The Owl Service has some skillful characterization of minor characters. To make a figure as strange as Huw believable takes a real ability, yet I never doubted his reality. Nancy, Gwyn's mother, is a strong figure, and Clive, Allison's step-father, is well-drawn. Even Allison's mother, who never actually appears on the scene, is well-known to a reader through her effect on the other characters. But Roger, one of the three teen-agers in the central triangle, seems weak. We know about him, but we don't know him as an individual. And since he is essential to the resolution of the plot, this seems to me a flaw in the book.

But all these criticisms are simply assessments of why three fine books are not even better than they are. None of the weaknesses is caused by or directly concerned with the inclusion of material from the oral tradition. The use of myth or legend as an operative force in the modern story is one of the real strengths of each book. This is combined, of course, with a narrative skill of unusual quality by all three authors. The strength of the old stories comes from the sifting through generations of oral retellings, until non-essentials are removed and what remains are stories showing genuine understanding of the human condition. It is easy to imagine the same format used by an inferior writer to produce books insulting to the intelligence of their young audience. In fact, to use this format a writer must not only have ability, he must take the legendary material seriously, believe in its essential truth, before he can employ its power in a story of the contemporary world. We have all read books in which the author uses material without seeming to grasp its real significance. Compare, for instance, the strength of The Lord of the Rings or even The Hobbit with the thinness of the Prydain series by Lloyd Alexander. Tolkien not only was steeped in material from the Norse and Celtic oral tradition, he also took it seriously and understood its real meaning. Alexander, it seems to me, has read the Mabinogion and used it as an artificial structure without ever exhibiting a true understanding of its underlying seriousness.

Like any other form, the fantasy which employs material from the oral tradition can have good or poor practitioners. But for the writer who knows the material well and appreciates its possibilities and who has the skill to handle it well, there is a reserve of power in these stories hardly tapped yet. The world of today, seen through the age-old meanings of legend, is a world of previously unsuspected depth for young readers and of promise of both terror and joy. It is this double perspective that has produced some of the most interesting recent fantasy and could be a source of other fine work as more writers rediscover these long-forgotten tales.

FOOTNOTES

[1]Jane Langton, "The Weak Place in the Cloth: A Study of Fantasy for Children", The Horn Book, October, 1973, p. 438.

[2]William Mayne, A Game of Dark (New York: E. P. Dutton & Co., 1971), p. 34.

[3]Mayne, pp. 91-92.

[4]Mayne, p. 29.

[5]Mayne, p. 124.

[6]Mayne, pp. 26-27.

[7]Rosemary Harris, The Seal-Singing (New York: Macmillan, 1971, p. 28.

[8]Harris, p. 29.

[9]Harris, p. 88.

[10]Harris, p. 100.

[11]Alan Garner, The Owl Service (New York: Henry Z. Walck, Inc., 1967), p. 90.

[12] Garner, p. 90.

[13]Garner, pp. 125-126.

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